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**UNITED STATES MILITARY IN CENTRAL ASIA: BEYOND OPERATION
ENDURING FREEDOM**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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23 October 2009

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Abstract

United States Military in Central Asia: Beyond Operation Enduring Freedom

U.S. interests in Central Asia are far-reaching and varied. The arguments, both for and against a post Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) U.S. military presence in Central Asia are equally diverse. Publicly, the United States claims it has no plans to maintain long-term basing in Central Asia. Yet, the longer the conflict in Afghanistan rages on, the harder it will be to make the case to draw down significantly or eliminate the current military presence in Central Asia. While there are economic, political, and strategic reasons supporting the post- OEF U.S. presence in Central Asia, this paper examines the military/security necessity for a continued U.S. military presence. As background, this paper begins by providing a synopsis of U.S. interests in Central Asia and the influence of those interests on U.S. Security Cooperation since the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, this paper provides arguments for and against a post-OEF U.S. military presence in Central Asia and then draws conclusions and offers recommendations based on an analysis of those arguments.

Introduction

U.S. interests in the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have changed significantly over the past ten to fifteen years in response to an ever-changing international security environment. The growing threat of transnational terrorism, rising oil prices and the global economic crisis have all influenced U.S. interests in these newly independent states in one way or another. Publicly, the United States claims it has no plans to maintain a permanent presence in Central Asia. In October 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated, “I declare that we in America are not



Figure 1. Map of Central Asia (Reprinted from Central Intelligence Agency website, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/cia-maps-publications/maps/802868.jpg>)

seeking a permanent military presence in Kyrgyzstan and anywhere else in other parts of Central Asia.”¹ The terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, not only changed the world and how Americans view it, but also they significantly changed U.S. interests in Central Asia and established the foundation for what will be an enduring presence in the region.

During the 1990s, the United States’ policy in Central Asia centered on security, economics, and political relationships. After 9/11, U.S. military cooperation in the region focused almost exclusively on anti-terrorism. As the U.S. military focused its attention on Iraq in 2003, however, the State Department focused on security (including anti-terrorism, nonproliferation and combating narcotics trafficking), energy, and internal reform.² Given the potential for access to the vast energy resources of the Caspian Region, one could argue a number of economic, political, and strategic reasons supporting a continuing United States presence in Central Asia. While those reasons are compelling, a significant U.S. military presence in Central Asia will be a key factor in regional stabilization long after the United States secures peace in Afghanistan.

U.S. Interests in Central Asia and their Influence on Security Cooperation

In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States focused military engagement in Central Asia on assisting the newly independent states adopt western political-military institutions, protecting their territorial sovereignty and independence by improving border security, implementing free market economies and democratic processes,

¹ Condoleezza Rice, “U.S. Secretary of State Says No Permanent Military Presence Sought in Central Asia,” *Interfax-Kazakhstan* (13 October 2005), quoted in McCarthy, *The Limits of Friendship: U.S. Security Cooperation in Central Asia*, 148.

² A. Elizabeth Jones, “Testimony,” *House, Central Asia: Developments and the Administration’s Policy: Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the Committee on International Relations*, 108th Cong., 1st sess., 2003, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/25798.htm> (accessed 4 October 2009).

guaranteeing access to energy resources and developing other raw materials in the region.³

In addition to ending the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union increased the potential for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction left behind in Kazakhstan and played a key role in shaping U.S. security cooperation activities in the region during the early 1990s. Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines security cooperation as “all Department of Defense interactions with foreign defense establishments to build defense relationships that promote specific U.S. security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.”⁴

Having focused primarily on economic, political, and security capacity building activities during the 1990s, the United States shifted its interests and, subsequently, its security cooperation activities in Central Asia quickly to an anti-terrorism focus after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. Elizabeth Jones, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, stated, “The countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia will play a critical role in this campaign against terrorism. They will be strong and reliable allies in this new fight, but will require all of us in NATO, the EU and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] to look for ways to support and encourage them to make the tough decisions ahead.”⁵

Given the Fiscal Year (FY) 2002 shift in interests to a counter-terrorism focus, the United States redirected significant amounts of security assistance funding to Central Asia with primary emphasis on those countries that provided basing and over flight rights to the

³ Wishnick, *Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia*, 1.

⁴ JP 1-02, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 490.

⁵ A. Elizabeth Jones, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs (address, German Studies Association, Crystal City, VA, 5 October 2001). <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2001/10/mil-011009-usia04.htm> (accessed 13 October 2009).

United States and coalition partners engaged in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Prior to this shift in U.S. interests, the former Soviet republics received relatively small amounts of U.S. security assistance funding when compared to other regions where U.S. interests were more significant. For example, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but prior to 9/11, the total security assistance allocations [Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET)] in Central Asia totaled \$26.7M.⁶ In FY 2002, Congress authorized emergency supplemental FMF funding for the Central Asian states totaling over \$55M, a 49 percent increase over the amount allocated from 1997 to 2001. Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, which provided basing rights in support of OEF, received the majority of this funding, \$36.207M and \$11M respectively. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan received \$4.750M and \$3.7M in FY 2002 respectively.⁷ Figure 2 illustrates the trend in security assistance funding for Central Asia from 1993 to 2009 and indicates that FY 2003 (and subsequent years) saw a steady decrease in security assistance funding across the region [almost as quickly as security assistance funding increased in FY 2002]. The United States' shift in focus in 2003 from Afghanistan to Iraq leading up to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM drove this decrease. Additionally, concerns over the lack of human rights and political reforms among the Central Asian states continued to grow and came to a head following the Andijan, Uzbekistan, incident in May 2005. During this incident, snipers and government troops on armored personnel carriers and military trucks began firing indiscriminately into a crowd in which the overwhelming majority of people, numbering in

⁶ Federation of American Scientists, "Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales, and Military Assistance Facts 1989-2000," http://www.fas.org/asmp/profiles/FMS_FACTS/FMS_Facts_Index.html (accessed 8 September 2009).

⁷ McCarthy, *The Limits of Friendship: U.S. Security Cooperation in Central Asia*, 85.

the thousands, were unarmed.⁸ Within weeks of this incident and following calls from the United States and the European Union for an international investigation into the incident to hold those responsible accountable, Uzbek officials asked the United States to withdraw from the Uzbek air base at Karshi-Khanabad.⁹

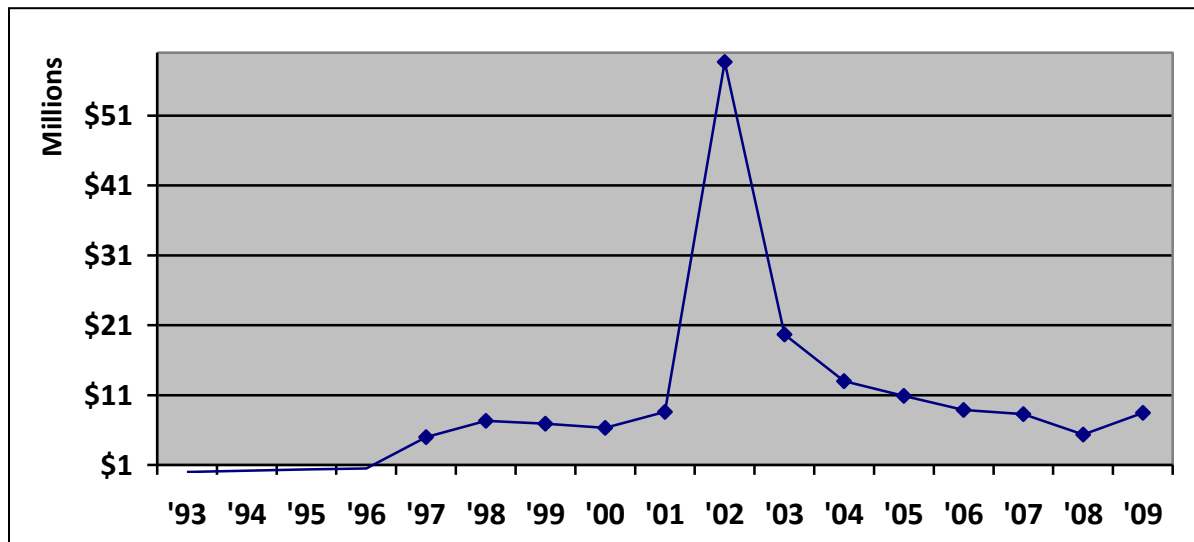


Figure 2. Security Assistance Funding in Central Asia, 1993 - 2009. (Compiled from *Federation of American Scientists, Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales, and Military Assistance Fact Sheets, 1989 - 2000, Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY 2001 - 2007, and Foreign Operations Congressional Budget Justification: FY 2008 - 2009*)

Despite a tumultuous decade, U.S. interests in Central Asia remained relatively consistent over the past few years. The Obama Administration recently highlighted U.S. interests in continued access to bases in Central Asia as well as the long-term security and stability of the region. Currently, U.S. interests in Central Asia include fostering democratization, human rights, free markets and trade, assisting the development of oil and other resources, combating terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and drug production and trafficking.¹⁰

⁸ Lobe, "Uzbekistan: Rights Watch Calls Civilian Killings A „Massacre,“" 1.

⁹ Olcott, "The Shrinking U.S. Footprint in Central Asia," 333.

¹⁰ Nichol, *Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for the U.S.*, i.

Post-OEF U.S. Military Presence in Central Asia

Although there are many reasons supporting a post-OEF U.S. military presence in Central Asia, three stand out as significant. First, U.S. military presence in Central Asia will ensure long-term security and stability in the region and serve as a deterrent to the development of terrorist safe havens. Second, the presence of U.S. military forces provides a permanent foothold in the region and allows for the rapid response to potential security issues or conflicts that might arise. Third, U.S. forces in Central Asia serve as a counterbalance to Russian and Chinese military influence.

In order for these arguments to remain valid, one must make two overarching assumptions. First, there will be U.S. national level support for a continuing military presence in Central Asia once there is peace in Afghanistan. Second, at least one of the Central Asian states will support the continued basing of U.S. forces in the absence of ongoing military operations in Afghanistan.

A continuing U.S. military presence in Central Asia will ensure long-term security and stability in the region and deter the development of terrorist safe havens. According to the United States Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan (August 2009), the United States' broad strategic goal in Afghanistan is to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately defeat Al Qaeda, its allies and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan."¹¹ The continued presence of U.S. military forces in Central Asia supports this goal. Concern over the potential for Taliban support of radical Islamic movements within their countries compelled many Central Asian leaders to provide support to the United States-led coalition in Afghanistan. The armed radical organization, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was of particular concern due to its suspected

¹¹ U.S. Government, *Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, 1.

involvement in several acts of terrorism from 1999 to 2000.¹² These included the attempted assassination of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, several armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan and at least two incidents of hostage taking.¹³ Though the IMU first sought to overthrow the Karimov government, like many other radical Islamic movements, it later championed the greater aspirations of creating an Islamic state across Central Asia, eventually joining forces with the Taliban.¹⁴ Military operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2002 seriously disrupted IMU activities and reportedly killed Juma Namangani, the IMU's suspected leader.¹⁵ The resurgence of the Taliban and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, which occurred after the United States began focusing its efforts and manpower on the war in Iraq in 2003, illustrates the resilience of these organizations.

Although many believe that operations in Afghanistan have significantly destroyed the IMU movement, in May 2009 the state operated media in Uzbekistan reported two violent attacks suggesting that the movement could be making a comeback. There is speculation, however, that these incidents were an attempt, as alleged in the past, by the Uzbek government to create the appearance of terrorist activity to justify regime-sponsored repression.¹⁶ At any rate, the presence of U.S. troops in the region has effectively deterred the resurgence of widespread terrorist activity and development of terrorist safe havens in Central Asia. A complete withdrawal of U.S. forces would almost certainly provide the opportunity and environment for radical groups such as the IMU to recruit, train, and conduct

¹² The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is a small group of militants whose members include citizens of several ex-Soviet republics as well as Uighurs from the restive western Muslim region of Xinjiang in China.

¹³ Schatz, "Islamism and anti-Americanism in Central Asia," 338.

¹⁴ Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran," 1.

¹⁵ Schatz, "Islamism and anti-Americanism in Central Asia," 338.

¹⁶ "Asia: Fata Fergana; Unrest in Uzbekistan," 47.

virtually unchallenged terrorist activity that would eventually spread throughout the region and, ultimately, take root in the areas of northern Afghanistan.

The post-OEF presence of U.S. forces in Central Asia provides a permanent foothold in the region and facilitates rapid response to potential security issues or conflicts that might arise. There are several potential conflicts in the region that would require a rapid response by U.S. forces. One such scenario is a nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan that results in a widespread humanitarian disaster. David Shlapak, international policy analyst at the RAND think tank, co-authored a report outlining a hypothetical war between India and Pakistan. According to the RAND scenario, Indian counterinsurgency operations in the Kashmir and Punjab regions result in Pakistani retaliation against military installations supporting Indian operations. Subsequently, the conflict escalates into a series of nuclear exchanges between the two countries resulting in widespread death and destruction. The scenario ends shortly after India accepts a Pakistani cease-fire offer.¹⁷ Although the RAND report does not estimate the number of potential deaths in such a scenario, the current populations of India and Pakistan (1,166,079,217 and 176,242,949 respectively) suggest an estimated death toll in an Indian-Pakistani nuclear exchange in the tens if not hundreds of millions.¹⁸

Although the hypothetical situation described above occurs in 2005, ongoing tensions between the two countries and Pakistan's ranking as tenth on the 2009 failed states index, indicate a similar scenario could easily take place at any time.¹⁹ Given the potential fallout from such a nuclear confrontation, bases in the immediate area would be inaccessible. The

¹⁷ Shlapak, "Selected Scenarios," in *Sources of Conflict in the 21st Century*, Khalilzad and Lesser, eds., 329-330.

¹⁸ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "India and Pakistan," *The World Fact Book*.

¹⁹ The Fund for Peace, "Pakistan," *2009 Failed States Index*.

presence of U.S. forces at established facilities in Central Asia, ready to respond and support large-scale humanitarian relief efforts, would significantly minimize the loss of life and human suffering. The time to work diplomatic channels to secure basing rights is not after this type of incident has occurred.

Another potential scenario would be an attempt by a Central Asian country to take over one of its neighbors. Geoffrey Blainey, an Australian historian, points out “wars usually begin when fighting nations disagree on their relative strength. One state may wage war against another because the enemy appears weakened by unrest at home.”²⁰ The setting for potential conflict in Central Asia would likely be the Fergana Valley, which encompasses a portion of each of the five Central Asian states. Figure 3 is a map of the Ferghana Valley region. The potential for interstate border conflict in Central Asia is enormous. Years of disputes over territory have pitted neighboring states against one another as each asserts a legitimate claim to portions of the disputed Ferghana Valley. The distinct disparity in military strength among the various countries also fuels these tensions. For example, compared to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is a weaker state. Nevertheless, Uzbek leaders are concerned about the ability of small terrorist cells with Tajik ties to wreak havoc on Uzbek territory. Because of Uzbekistan’s central location, it lays claim to territory in each of the neighboring countries. The large number of ethnic Uzbeks resident throughout the region also fuels the fear of eventual Uzbek imperialism.²¹

²⁰ Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 122.

²¹ Olikier and Szayna, eds., *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army*, 31.

region. Article one of the SCO Charter outlines several goals including regional cooperation, coordination, and integration.²³ Evan A. Feigenbaum, deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, stated, “We noted with interest that the 2006 and 2007 Shanghai and Bishkek declarations did not repeat the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s 2005 statement that called for a ‘timeline’ on Coalition military presence in the region.”²⁴ Although the omission of a call for Coalition forces to withdraw hardly signifies a change, or even a relaxing in Russian and Chinese desire to see the United States leave Central Asia, it may signify their willingness to tolerate that presence given that anti-terrorism and anti-narcotics topped the agenda at the SCO’s August 2007 Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.²⁵

Post-OEF U.S. Military Presence in Central Asia: The Counter-Argument

Even though the previous section provided arguments supporting a continuing post-OEF U.S. military presence in Central Asia, some would argue that the current U.S. military presence is purely a short-term necessity due to ongoing operations in Afghanistan. First, the United States’ commitment to a region historically criticized for extremely poor human rights practices as well as corrupt and authoritarian regimes is contrary to U.S. national security interests and sends the wrong message to the international community. According to the 2006 *U.S. National Security Strategy*:

The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere. The United States Government will work to advance human dignity in word and deed, speaking out for freedom and against violations of human rights and allocating appropriate resources to advance these ideals.

²³ “Charter of Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” Article 1. Established in 2001 as a non-military alliance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization initially set its goals as dealing with extremism and other security threats in Central Asia but has since expanded its scope to include cooperation in disaster relief and trade.

²⁴ Feigenbaum, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Future of Central Asia,” 2.

²⁵ The Moscow News, “China, Russia, Central Asian Leaders Tout New Strength.”

To protect our Nation and honor our values, the United States seeks to extend freedom across the globe by leading an international effort to end tyranny and to promote effective democracy.²⁶

Some critics argue that a double standard exists when it comes to enforcing compliance with democratization and human rights standards. In fact, during the George W. Bush administration, Congress held hearings on the perceived double standard in Middle East countries. In his testimony, Thomas Malinowski, advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, stated, “the United States is most effective in promoting liberty around the world when people out there believe that we’re rising above our own narrow self interest, when they believe that we’re defending universal ideals. If instead our rhetoric about democracy is seen as a weapon that we only use against our enemies, people around the world become extremely cynical about everything we do in the name of freedom.”²⁷

Moreover, a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia could perpetuate an expectation of reform such as respect for human dignity, transparent, democratic political institutions, and so forth, in the region. The lack of progress toward positive reform in these areas by the authoritarian regimes could result in widespread social unrest and ultimately lead to insurgent activity. The United States would find itself in the untenable position of having to defend the same tyrannical regimes that its National Security Strategy seeks to marginalize.

Second, the U.S. military’s adoption of the expeditionary concept has significantly improved its ability to mobilize quickly and project firepower from forward locations. This is especially true in the case of the U.S. Air Force. Proponents of this concept argue that

²⁶ U.S. President, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, page?

²⁷ Thomas Malinowski, “Testimony,” House, *Is There A Human Rights Double Standard? U.S. Policy toward Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Uzbekistan: Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., 2007, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 12 October 2009).

although U.S. forces would require prepositioned equipment and materiel to facilitate expeditionary operations, the establishment of main operating bases is not an essential requirement for successful contingency operations. The last 30 years provides several examples of successful expeditionary operations in which U.S. forces responded on short notice to areas of conflict and humanitarian disasters around the globe. Operations URGENT FURY, DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, are just a few examples of successful employment of the expeditionary concept.²⁸ Although each of these operations resulted in varying degrees of success, they all demonstrated the ability of the U.S. military to mobilize and project overwhelming combat power on short notice. The U.S. Army has also implemented a rapid deployment concept with the employment of Stryker Brigade Combat Teams (SBCT) in 2003. Since then, the Army has fielded seven Stryker brigade combat teams.²⁹

Finally, a discussion of the U.S. military presence in Central Asia must factor Russian interests into the equation. One can hardly dispute the fact that Russian interests in Central Asia, although similar to those of the United States, are far more significant. According to Fiona Hill, senior fellow for foreign policy with the Aspen Institute Congressional Program, “Russian interests in Central are security, energy development, and restoration of Soviet-era

²⁸ Operation URGENT FURY was the American invasion of the Island of Grenada in October 1983. Operation DESERT SHIELD was the operational name of the military defense, by a 30-nation force led by the United States, of Saudi Arabia and its oil installations following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Operation DESERT STORM followed Operation DESERT SHIELD and was the military offensive to expel Iraq's forces from Kuwait.

²⁹ Cox, “Geren, Casey Eye More Stryker Brigades,” 23. The Army developed the SBCT originally to be a lethal, rapidly deployable, technologically advanced fighting force. Then Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki envisioned the interim BCT, as the SBCT was known in its infancy, as a medium force that would bridge the gap between the light and heavy divisions. This force would be quick to deploy, yet it would maintain adequate firepower to engage any enemy threat.

communications and trade infrastructure.”³⁰ Furthermore, the Russians view any United States involvement in Central Asia as destabilizing and an encroachment into the Russian sphere of influence. As one of the founding members of the SCO, Russia sees itself along with the other SCO members as the guarantors of security in the Region. Although originally promoted as a non-military, political-economic organization, the SCO in 2007 had troops from the six member nations engaged in “Peace Mission 2007.”³¹ While billed as a multilateral, anti-terrorism training exercise, some believe Peace Mission 2007 served as a rehearsal for a possible response to future separatist uprisings or rebellions in Central Asia.³² Exercises of this nature demonstrate Russia’s desire to assert its position as the regional power and serves notice to the international community, the United States and NATO especially, that it is capable of assuring the security of its neighbors in the region.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is hard to dispute the fact that the United States-led campaign in Afghanistan and its military presence in Central Asia have significantly improved the security situation in Central Asia. Security and stability in Afghanistan, and arguably the entire Central and South Asia regions, currently depend on the presence of U.S. forces. However, the above discussion of the arguments for and against a post-OEF U.S. military presence in Central Asia suggest that while compelling, the arguments supporting a continuing U.S. presence are outweighed by the arguments against a long-term presence. While the current U.S. military

³⁰ Hill. “The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran.” 2, 3.

³¹ The SCO first conducted the Peace Mission 2007 exercises in Urumqi, capital of China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and later in Chelyabinsk in Russia's Ural Mountains, from 9 - 17 August 2007. Peace Mission 2007 sought to reinforce the anti-terror capabilities of the SCO member states and intensify partnership among them in defense affairs. Source?

³² Ziegler, “Putin Comes to Shove in Asia,” 22.

presence in Central Asia plays a significant role in regional stability, the evidence suggests that a significant post-OEF U.S. presence is not required to sustain that security posture over the long-term. Moreover, after considering the counter-arguments, it is fair to access that there are mechanisms in place to ensure continued stability if U.S. forces redeploy. This does not suggest, however, that the U.S. military should completely disengage from the region. In fact, the United States should continue to pursue a robust security cooperation program with Central Asia, building upon the United States Central Command's current Theater Security Cooperation Plan. This will further enhance the capacity of the Central Asian states to defend against the threat of radical Islamic extremist. Additionally, the U.S. State Department should increase current security assistance funding levels to resource properly Department of Defense security cooperation efforts. Furthermore, the United States should maintain its presence at Manas Air Base, Kyrgyzstan, as long as it is financially and politically feasible to do so. Manas represents the best opportunity to advance the United States-Kyrgyz military relationship and serves the dual purpose as an established air base to which U.S. forces could quickly deploy and project combat power or conduct security cooperation activities. This however, will require a robust security cooperation program that builds on current relationships in order to secure agreements, which will facilitate future access. Additionally, the counter-argument accurately suggests that the U.S. military's propensity toward expeditionary warfare significantly reduces the requirement for permanent basing in Central Asia and supports the position that permanent presence does not necessarily guarantee access during a crisis. Finally, United States and Russian cooperation in Central Asia will play a huge role in the long-term stability of this developing region. Yet, Russia's concerns over a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia and the possible impacts on

its interests in the region currently hinder any prospect for meaningful United States-Russian cooperation. Therefore, the period immediately following successful completion of military operations in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region should satisfy Russian concerns and offer the best opportunity for effective United States-Russian cooperation in Central Asia.

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